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## From the Writer

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As my class was discussing “The Portrait,” a short story by Nikolai Gogol, we touched briefly on the topic of perception and the ways in which the artist in Gogol’s story loses control of the portrait he paints. I had been having trouble determining what to write about in my second paper, and I decided to pursue that subject because the gap between a writer’s intentions and the way his work is interpreted interests me.

After I explored that theme in my second paper, I decided to return to it for my fourth paper and bring Dostoevsky’s *Poor Folk* into the discussion, as well as “The Overcoat,” another short story by Gogol. While it had been relatively easy to see the theme of the artist losing control of his work in “The Portrait,” I had a little more trouble connecting the other two stories to the topic in a meaningful way. Through studying critical essays on *Poor Folk* and analyzing the relevant sections of the text closely, I developed a position on Dostoevsky’s relevance to the subject, noting that he creates one of his characters, Makar Devushkin, as an amateur literary critic who misinterprets Gogol’s work. Once I began to find the connections the three stories shared, my interest in the concept helped me put together a strong argument.

— Georgianne Maroon

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*Prize Essay Winner*

## DOSTOEVSKY AND GOGOL'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS OF WRITERS' LIMITATIONS

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One of the more frustrating realizations most writers make during their careers is that their work, no matter how hard they try to craft it to communicate certain messages to their readers, always has the potential to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. Both Dostoevsky and Gogol have published works that illustrate and discuss this problem, both implicitly and explicitly. In *Poor Folk* Dostoevsky shows, through his protagonist Makar Devushkin's reaction to Gogol's "The Overcoat," the way the public tends to assign their own meanings to literature depending only on what message they want to take from it. (Devushkin, a poor copyist living in St. Petersburg, is sent a copy of the story by his confidant Varvara, and soon afterward writes angrily to her that it has offended him.) Gogol, in "The Overcoat," creates the opportunity for readers like Devushkin to misinterpret his work by making it ambiguous in meaning and message. In "The Portrait," however, he addresses the problem of misreading directly in a number of ways, illustrating the worst-case scenario of an artist losing control over the repercussions of his own artwork for his audience. Dostoevsky shows, through Devushkin's attempts at literary criticism in *Poor Folk*, a common result of the ambiguity Gogol creates in his work: readers who do not understand the purpose of literature and take it only at face value will misinterpret it, leading to confusion about their places in society. In fact, he uses Devushkin to represent the literary critics of his time; Dostoevsky feels that critics often miss the points of the works they analyze but are confident in their interpretations nonetheless. In the end, both Dostoevsky and Gogol essentially resign themselves to the knowledge that some people are bound to deduce meanings the authors never intended to

convey from their work, and each uses his stories to show his awareness of the limitations writers, and all artists, inevitably face.

Gogol first addresses this issue in “The Overcoat” by creating a minor character who misinterprets literature in an exaggerated and comical way. His narrative opens with an anecdote about a policeman who thinks he has been personally ridiculed by a piece of literature and who “states clearly that the government’s decrees are perishing and his own sacred name is decidedly being taken in vain. And as proof he attached to his petition a most enormous tome . . . in which a police chief appears on every tenth page, in some places even in a totally drunken state” (394). The policeman, of course, is meant as a caricature, an outrageous example, but in *Poor Folk*, Devushkin responds much the same way to “The Overcoat” itself, thinking that it has been written about him, and for the sole purpose of offending him. Devushkin interprets “The Overcoat” as a straightforward narrative about a poor, hardworking man being oppressed by society and meeting an unpleasant end as a direct result. He responds with strong emotion to the story because he, like Akaky Akakievich, is an impoverished copyist who seems to have little chance of gaining worldly wealth or status. Indeed, Dostoevsky deliberately creates Devushkin as a similar character to Akaky Akakievich, albeit a more realistic and multi-dimensional one who is able to have a relationship with another person (Varvara), while Akaky Akakievich’s only affection is for his new overcoat.

However, the clear-cut tale Devushkin reads is not truly the one Gogol tells. While Akaky Akakievich is indeed a poor copyist who is constantly mocked by those richer and more powerful than himself, Gogol hints that his obsession with his new overcoat reflects a materialistic tendency, and that this tendency, not his lower-class status, is the cause of his eventual downfall and death. Akaky dies after being robbed of his coat as he is walking home from a party thrown for him in the wealthier part of St. Petersburg, implying that had he not been out enjoying the worldly pleasures that came with his new coat, he would not have had the coat stolen, been forced to walk home in the cold, and fallen ill. Devushkin overlooks that particular bit of subtext and also takes issue with the fact that Akaky Akakievich dies at all, seeing the ending of “The Overcoat” as a final insult to a helpless man with no redeeming qualities. However, Gogol does in fact allow Akaky Akakievich to exact some revenge on those who

have tormented him—as a ghost, he steals the overcoat of the “*important person*” who berated him days before his death, and arguably gains some power in death that he never had in life, as he haunts the town of St. Petersburg (415). Devushkin—like many readers, Dostoevsky implies—ignores or misunderstands this facet of the story completely, and instead reads it as an uncomplicated tale of inescapable misery that is rather different from the ambiguous, layered narrative Gogol has really created.

While Gogol refers briefly to those who willfully misunderstand literature in “The Overcoat,” he discusses the issue at length throughout “The Portrait,” a story that focuses on two different artists and their eventual losses of control over what happens to their art, and those who come in contact with the art. The titular portrait is a painting of a cruel moneylender, done by a painter who is never named. After the moneylender’s death, the painting takes on supernatural qualities and carries the moneylender’s malevolent spirit with it as it passes from the painter to a number of other people, who all experience sudden changes for the worse in their fortunes after acquiring it. Gogol shows that the painter, who had not intended to create a powerful force for evil but merely a realistic, well-painted picture, has no way of stopping the painting’s path of destruction, or of convincing people who have not yet come in contact with it that it will ruin their lives. In the first part of the story, another artist, Chartkov, is forced for financial reasons to paint pictures for a living that take no real effort or feeling but are regarded as masterpieces of great talent, showing again that what an artist puts into his work and what the audience gets out of it can be completely unrelated. While Chartkov feels that his paintings have become “cold and dull . . . monotonous, predetermined, [and] long-worn out” (367), he is referred to in the local papers as an “honored” and “esteemed” painter of great skill (368). The writers who praise him, like Devushkin, fail to understand artists’ intentions, a reference by Gogol to the critics of his own time who he felt were misguided.

Gogol actually rewrote “The Portrait” seven years after its initial publication, giving the fantastic elements of the story an increased role in the second edition and doing everything in his power to influence the message readers would take from his work (Basom 419). Interestingly, as Ann Marie Basom notes in her article “The Fantastic in Gogol’s Two Versions of ‘Portret [sic],” “the fantastic questions the nature of reality

itself; in other words, it asks if what we perceive to be the nature of reality is really the nature of reality” (Basom 420). The second, and more widely read, version of “The Portrait” emphasizes the supernatural elements of the story, using the focus on phenomena beyond the characters’ control to show the inherent possibility of misunderstanding and misinterpretation in the world. Considering the main themes of the story itself, this was not an accidental decision on Gogol’s part. The “final” version of the text reflects Gogol’s awareness of his inability to determine how people will perceive his own work and—through the plight of the first painter in the story, who spends most of his life trying to erase the impact the money-lender’s portrait has had on him—the anxiety resulting from this awareness.

In *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky both acknowledges Gogol’s work and shows his own understanding of the many people who are bound to misread his work through his portrayal of Devushkin. Devushkin’s attempts to understand literature are most clearly illustrated in his indignant response to “The Overcoat,” and his attempts to rewrite the book in a way he thinks would be more suitable: “It would, however, have been much better not to have left [Akaky Akakievich] to die at all . . . but to make his overcoat be found, to have that general find out more about his virtues, invite him into his office, raise him in rank and give him a good hike in salary, so that then, you see, vice would have been punished and virtue would have triumphed” (68). Interestingly, while Devushkin’s impoverished life largely mirrors Akaky Akakievich’s, something very similar to his rewritten version of “The Overcoat” does happen near the end of his own story: he is given a raise and some better work to do, thereby gaining a somewhat higher social status. However, Varvara leaves to marry a rich, landowning man named Bykov soon afterwards, meaning that she will no longer be able to write the letters to Devushkin that have been one of the only sources of joy in his life. The despair Varvara’s departure brings Devushkin far outweighs the happiness he had felt from his sudden change in fortunes. Dostoevsky leads readers familiar with Gogol’s work to think that he may indeed intend to rewrite “The Overcoat” with a kinder, gentler ending, only to leave Devushkin, like Akaky Akakievich, in a bleak place at the end and show that Gogol’s story was written the way it was for a

reason and cannot be changed simply because some people may feel it is too harsh.

Through his attempts to reinvent “The Overcoat,” readers learn that Devushkin is not a sophisticated reader of literature and does not understand that not all stories are meant to be parables that teach uncomplicated moral lessons. His oversimplification of the text is meant by Dostoevsky to reflect and satirize the way some critics of his time misinterpreted Gogol; in her essay “Textuality and Intertextuality in Dostoevsky’s *Poor Folk*,” Rebecca Epstein-Matveyev points out,

Through his protagonist’s straight misreading of an already parodic text, Dostoevsky provides an exaggerated version of contemporary critics’ readings of Gogolian texts. At the same time, the author seems to anticipate Belinsky’s [a leading critic’s] sympathetic response to Devushkin . . . thus, the author simultaneously managed both to reinscribe ‘The Overcoat’ and its protagonist, and to mock straight readings in a way undetectable to the period’s leading literary critic. (543)

Epstein-Matveyev’s argument supports the view that Dostoevsky, in deliberately drawing parallels to “The Overcoat” within *Poor Folk*, aims to continue the discussion of literary interpretation he feels Gogol has begun. By portraying Devushkin as a kind of amateur literary critic, among his many other functions, Dostoevsky provides a subtle guide for readers on how not to read his stories and suggests that there is almost always more to be gained from a work of literature than what is obvious upon an initial examination of the text. Whether or not his readers take the hint is out of his control.

Through Devushkin and his interactions with the world of literature, Dostoevsky opens up numerous possibilities for discussion of literary criticism. Devushkin’s unshakeable opinions of his own understanding of writing—he assumes his comprehension of literature is so great that he could easily be an author himself, and at times informs Varvara matter-of-factly that his is the only opinion worth hearing on the matter of what is a good book and what is not—are part of the way Dostoevsky characterizes literary critics, and less observant readers in general. Through his character’s interpretation of Gogol, Dostoevsky manages both to further

the perception of Devushkin as representative of critics who do not understand the complex implications of novels and to bring Gogol and his work, through allusion, into the discussion of literary interpretation. In doing so, he shows key similarities between himself and Gogol: an understanding of the fact that most readers will not comprehend the meanings of their works exactly as they intended and an acknowledgment of that fact in their stories. This acknowledgment shows that they not only understand their limitations as authors, but can occasionally circumvent those limitations, to some degree, by satirizing them in such a way that perceptive readers will gain a better understanding of how their work was intended to be read.

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